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The Geopolitical Environment that Lead to WWI and How It Relates to Today

People in general are very uncomfortable with the notion that a simple individual, nobody can have such a large effect on our lives. It's more comforting that powerful groups of people or individuals are somehow running things. Even if they are nefarious. It's comforting to think that there is someone in control, similarly to the way that it is comforting to know that a plane won't just drop out of the sky on your house tomorrow. I was thinking about this idea when I was prompted to look back at history and ask myself who is the most influential individual in the last 100 years in terms of why the world has gone the way it did.. Most people would be tempted to say the name of a famous figure who any half knowledgeable person would know of. However I think that the person who is responsible for why the modern world is the way is it, is one of these nobodies of history. I think you could make the case, that the person who has the greatest effect on the 20th century was Gavrilo Princip. Gavrilo Princip, despite being one of these nobodies would be the one who would pull the trigger on the giant russian roulette game that would lead to the largest conflict the world had ever seen. And along with the uncomfortable realization that some random act by a historical nobody could change the world and history, I think that it important to understand the situation in the world at that time that allowed for it to spiral out of control, and ask if it could happen again.

On 28 June 1914, Gavrilo Princip killed two people. However as german historian Von Bismark stated, "terrorist attacks in themselves are meaningless, but it is often who you kill, and how the victims of the attacks respond, that will change the world." In this case one of Princip's

victims was the Archduke of Austria Franz Ferdinand, and the response to this action would spiral out of control and become a global conflict that would change the modern perception of war. The current state of Europe, and more famously the alliances among countries, would create a powder keg. And the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, which once again was nothing more than a terrorist attack, would be the spark.

Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on July 28, 1914. The next day, Russia reacted, mobilizing its army. On July 31, 1914, the German Empire gave France an ultimatum: in the case of a war between Germany and Russia, France was to remain neutral. At the same time, Czar Nicholas II was requested – also per ultimatum – to halt the Russian mobilization. When this ultimatum was ignored and the Russian government did not recall its army, the German military issued a declaration of war against Russia. On August 1, 1914, Emperor William II signed the war declaration. Not long after the invasion of Russia, France and then England would join the war and suddenly the entire continent was at war.

Studying the events that would lead to the beginning of world war I I think that is would be naive to ignore the question of if our current world is in a similar situation where a random act of say terrorism could lead to a global conflict. To understand this better I simplified it down to one area. As the Von Bismarck remarked prior to the assassination that would lead to WWI remarked, “I knew that if there was going to be an event to pull the trigger it would be the balkans, an area not worth a single grenadier” In my opinion the modern equivalent that I decided to look further into was the political environment surrounding Syria. The simple conflict that began is between Assad and his forces and rebel forces. However as the conflict has progressed the situation has become more and more complicated since its beginning. In 2012 the regional powers enter, with Iran supporting Assad with Hezbollah forces, and the gulf states,

mainly Saudi Arabia supplying rebel forces with money and supplies through Turkey and Jordan. Even the rebel side become more unclear as radical extremists flood in from the surrounding area to fight alongside them. Meanwhile Kurds take the opportunity to break away from Assad and carve out their own state in northern Syria.

In 2013 the US gets involved, almost bombing Assad. However in 2014, with the march of ISIS, the US's attention shifts and the US begins carrying out airstrikes on ISIS. Meanwhile Russia who backs Assad, begins saying that they are bombing ISIS, but instead bomb rebel forces. In addition Turkey begins to bombing Kurdish forces in Turkey and Syria, further confusing any notion of sides. Currently the situation in Syria is a mess. And with so much foreign backing, all who have seemingly united motives, it could in the future set the scene, where a relatively small event could erupt into a global conflict.