How Bad Directions (And A Sandwich) Started World War I

from NPR Program “ALL THINGS CONSIDERED”

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There are historic anniversaries and then there are historic anniversaries. The First World War began one hundred years ago this summer. It is a centennial that goes beyond mere remembrance. The consequences of that conflict are making headlines to this day. To underscore that, tomorrow and Wednesday, we're going turn history on its head with the help of some historians.

We're going to ask: What if the First World War never happened? Now, if that sounds like an unlikely exercise, compare it to an even more unlikely event, the one that actually occurred on June 28, 1914, in the city of Sarajevo. It was the spark that ignited a global conflagration, a moment in history that was dramatic, tragic but in some ways comic.

CHRISTOPHER CLARK: Its one of those subjects where no matter how many times you go through it, it never loses its magnetism.

SIEGEL: That's Christopher Clark. He's spent much time reviewing the events of that day in Sarajevo, and the events that led up to it. He's author of "The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went To War." Clark says that despite warnings of a Serbian plot to kill the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the archduke and his wife went on a visit to Bosnia-Herzegovina. They had minimum security. And their motorcade route through the city had been published.

CLARK: The morning of the 28th of June, around about 9 a.m., the royal couple, Ferdinand, the heir apparent to the Austro-Hungarian throne and his wife, Sophie Chotek, turned up at Sarajevo Railway Station. Greeted by a smiling cheering crowd. They got into a beautiful sports car - a beautiful coupe, a Graf and Stift coupe - and proceeded to make their way in as part of an autocade - a cavalcade of automobiles - down along the Appel Quay, which is one of the main streets of Sarajevo.

And hardly had they got about a third of their way across the city, but a young man called Nedeljko Cabrinovic threw a bomb that he was carrying which didn't hit the royal couple, but exploded under the next car. So already things are starting to go rather badly wrong.

SIEGEL: Yeah, not a good omen for the trip right there.

CLARK: Not a great omen. And, in fact, we're entitled to ask ourselves why at this point the archduke didn't simply call the visit off. And that was proposed by some members of his entourage. They said, you know, surely we should now leave. This is not a safe situation. But he hated being told what to do. He was a very irritable man and he said don't be ridiculous. This man is obviously and imbecile, he was obviously taken to the asylum, we'll continue with the tour as planned.

SIEGEL: And critically, a member of the auto or the motorcade was injured by that bomb blast and taken to the hospital.

CLARK: Absolutely. In fact, among those who were injured in the car behind - the third car behind Franz Ferdinand and his wife was his adjutant who was carrying with him the text of Franz Ferdinand's own speech, the one he was supposed to give when he reached the city hall at the other end of the Appel Quay. And this was a problem because it meant that the text of the speech was covered with blood, and was actually rather hard to read.

SIEGEL: So, the motorcade has had a bomb thrown at it. The archduke's adjutant has been injured and taken to the hospital. And the archduke treats it as another day at the office and we must proceed with this vital visit to Sarajevo. But I gather he decides that they should stop off at the hospital and see his man who's been injured first.

CLARK: Well, in the meanwhile, they go to the city hall where they meet with various dignitaries. And, at this point, a very comical moment occurs. The unfortunate man, a man called Mehmet Fehim Efendi Curcic was his name, and it fell to Curcic to give a welcoming speech to Franz Ferdinand and his wife. Curcic was a very nervous man at the best of times. But he was especially nervous on this day because, of course, he had heard the bomb going off. He had been told what had happened.

And he had this text which he was too nervous to alter. His text began with the words: All of the citizens of the capital city of Sarajevo find that their souls are filled with happiness, and they most enthusiastically greet Your Highness's most illustrious visit, et cetera, et cetera, whereupon he was interrupted by the furious Franz Ferdinand who burst out saying, what, this is how you welcome visitors by throwing bombs at them?

(LAUGHTER)

CLARK: And poor Curcic, of course, you know, fell silent. And, at this point, his wife was seeing whispering to Franz Ferdinand, history will never reveal what she said. But we can assume it was something along the lines of no, no, dear. It's not his fault. Let him continue. And, at which point, he said very well, you may continue. And so the speech went on. Franz Ferdinand then replied with his own speech, which he had to wipe because it was covered with the blood of his adjutant.

And then they got back into the car. At this point, somebody asked: Is there going to be another attempt on the life of His Highness? And Potoirek, the governor of the province turned to this man and said don't be ridiculous. Do you think Sarajevo is full of assassins? That was a rhetorical question but, in fact, the correct answer was yes, because there were seven assassins who had gathered in Sarajevo that day to carry out their work.

SIEGEL: And already, by the time that the bomb was thrown, at least some member of the party had backed out and didn't proceed with his part of the deal.

CLARK: Absolutely. Several of these young men - they were scarcely more than boys really, very inexperienced - they simply froze with terror as the car approached. One of them ran away. Another one just remained stock-still, unable to move.

SIEGEL: Well, after the archduke's meetings at City Hall, I gather it's decided to change the route for the autocade. But someone forgets to tell the drivers.

CLARK: Yes, they're all chatting about the route out of the city. And it's agreed that they shouldn't turn right onto Franz Josef Street, which leads through the narrow lanes of the Bazaar District because, if there was going to be another attack on Their Highnesses, then that is the place where this is likely to happen. But they're talking about this in German and the driver of the first car is Czech, and so is the driver of the second car. They don't understand what this conversation is about. And nobody bothers to translate for them. It's a very Austro-Hungarian problem.

And the cars take off again. They make their way down the Appel Quay and then the first car swings into Franz Josef Street, immediately followed by car number two with Franz Ferdinand and his wife in it. And it's at that point that something up street the extraordinary happens. They're on the original planned and advertised route, so that is where Gavrilo Princip has placed himself in front of the Schiller's general store. He's under - standing under the awning in the shadow waiting for this happen.

Suddenly, the car is in front of him and, to his astonishment, the car stops because someone in the car is telling the driver you idiot. You're not supposed to go down this road. Stop the car and back up. And just as the car comes to a halt, Princip steps forward. And he recalled later in his depositions to the court that time seemed to slow down. And he said, I was filled with a strange feeling. And he took these two shots.

And this same strange feeling also suffused the governor of the province, Potoirek, who recalls seeing the young man pointing his gun but not hearing the shots, seeing these two plumes of white smoke but being unaware of where the shots had been fired or whether they'd hit their marks. In fact, of course, if Princip had spent his entire life learning about human anatomy, he couldn't have placed his shots better than he did. They were both lethal. And she, Sophie Chotek, was already dying by the time the car pulled back onto the Appel Quay.

SIEGEL: The fact that Princip happened to be in front of Moritz Schiller's general store - I've seen it described as a delicatessen in some versions - where he'd just gotten a sandwich, I gather. The fact that he walks out of this food store at the very moment that the archduke's car stops, at that very stop - his colleagues having failed to do their part in the assassination plot - he must have felt as though destiny had visited him at that moment.

CLARK: He did but he wasn't a cruel, hard-hearted man. So he was also rather put off and disturbed by the fact that, as he put it, there was a lady in the car. He hadn't really reckoned with that and he hadn't intended to kill her. But, of course, he took both their lives.

I'd forgotten about the sandwich. I mean that adds a nice Clint Eastwood touch...

(LAUGHTER)

CLARK: ...to the scene. History does not relate whether the sandwich was completely eaten before or after the act took place.

SIEGEL: There are so many what-ifs including the big one, which is what if after having a bomb thrown at your motorcade and having one of your top aides injured, what if you just decided right then and there this is not a good visit, let's stop. Down to what if you didn't make the right turn on Franz Josef Street, if you told the drivers where they were supposed to be going in the proper language. Anything could have prevented that assassination that day.

CLARK: That's true. There are two ways of thinking of this. One is, you know, to focus on all those moments at which things could have panned differently. But - and that's perfectly legitimate. On the other hand, you know, one mustn't forget if you send seven young men with guns and bombs into a small town, where some royal personnel are going to turn up, and whose route through the city has stupidly been publicly advertised for days in advance, without virtually anything in the way of security precautions, well, the likelihood of a success is not negligible.

SIEGEL: Well, Christopher Clark, thank you very much for talking with us about that very remarkable day in June 1914 in Sarajevo.

CLARK: It's been a pleasure talking to you.

SIEGEL: That's Christopher Clark. His book, "The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went To War," comes out in paperback next week.

So what if the amateur plot in Sarajevo had failed? Well, that is the premise of tomorrow's counterfactual story, "A World Without World War I."