



Era 7 Overview

The First World War (1914-1918) came at the end of a complex era. The Long Nineteenth Century had seen the rise of democracies, increased economic production, and reforms, but also empire, racism, and terrible poverty. The years since the war have been similarly complicated. In the last century, we have seen another world war and a great deal of suffering, but there's also evidence that things are getting better. What is the human experience of the century we have just lived through, and is this experience the same for everyone?



00:01

*Kim Lochner and Colby
Burnett in conversation*

Is this really the last era?

I prefer to say next era. Sure, it brings us up to the present, but the world will keep spinning.

For now.

What do you mean, for now?

*Stacks of history books;
video footage of carriage
traffic in the 19th century;
a painting of a revolution*

Hi, I'm Kim Lochner, and along with Colby Burnett, we're introducing Era 7, The Great Convergence and Divergence. What does the world of May 1914 look like in the pages of an average history textbook? It looks like a world sitting on top of the progress of the previous century and a half. The revolutions of the Long 19th Century were in full swing, or even completed. The revolutions, politics, and ways of life promised something new, fresh, and, well, revolutionary for the entire world.

00:53

*Animated map shows
democracies in 1914
covering good part of the
world
Photo montage of workers
in industrial factories*

Liberal and democratic revolutions had brought representative government to much of the world for the first time. A lot of states had outlawed slavery and coerced labor, such as serfdom. In many places, labor reforms put children in schools, rather than jobs, and introduced safety regulations and protections for workers.

Production and distribution had also been revolutionized. The Industrial Revolution provided more efficient work and cheaper everyday products for consumers. Indoor heating, sewer systems, and other great modern innovations were spreading, slowly, around the world. Capitalism brought freedom of economic exchange and greater overall wealth, while socialism promised to spread that wealth to more people. All of this transformed, and was transformed by, global networks that connected most of the world. Telegraphs, steamships, and railroads moved people, goods, and ideas further and more rapidly than ever before.

02:02

*Animated map that
showed democracies in
1914 now also shows
colonies in 1914
Problem 1: Inequality of
Opportunity; animations of
farmers, coal miners, and
plantation workers*

From one perspective, this seemingly happy story of progress for everyone illustrates the global changes that had happened by May of 1914. However, if we look more closely, and more historically, we see two problems with this view. First, not everybody in 1914 shared in these revolutionary changes in quite the same way. Democracy and representation did not extend to the inhabitants of the colonies of great empires. Workers on rubber plantations in Central Africa and Southeast Asia and on coal mines in Northern England and Pennsylvania often did not receive the protections promised to laborers. Farmers in rural regions frequently remained too poor to buy the new consumer goods, as did many factory workers in densely packed cities. Railroads provided the opportunity to travel and brought new ideas to some. But they also occupied land and trampled cultures.

03:11

*Problem 2: The First
World War; video footage
from WW1 – soldiers
departing for war*

Second, many of the advances in technology celebrated in May 1914 were about to be the cause of major destruction. Just three months later, the First World War would break out. The most powerful countries in the world-- industrialized, economically strong, and, in many cases, liberal democracies-- would harness all of their democratic passions, money, factories, railroads and steamships to the task of killing each other. That war would end in 1918. But the years since have seen global depressions, another world war, the Cold War, and ongoing violent conflicts.

*Video footage: a factory
polluting the air; ice
melting*

04:10

Colby Burnett

*Photo montage showing
various modern medical
technologies; children
working on computers in
school*

04:44

*Photographs of people
around the globe living in
poverty
Graph shows the
percentage of people
living in extreme poverty
decreasing
Children learning in
school; playing outside*

05:35

*Photographs of Detroit in
the early 1900s*

*many photos of large
factories Detroit*

06:41

*Video footage from the
world wars;
A car factory produces
tanks*

And now we face a greater problem, perhaps the greatest of all. The environmental effects of this “progress” could threaten all our lives.

The century since May of 1914 has also seen many great advances, a lot of them driven by globalization: the tying together of the regions and people of the world; medical and technological leaps that spread rapidly from one place to another, in many cases extending our lives and improving them. Global trade flourishes, giving people around the world access to a multitude of foods and products from far away. We can communicate with each other, via the internet, in ways that would have been unimaginable in the past. Life expectancies and literacy rates have increased almost everywhere.

And yet through it all, this tightly connected world continues to have great inequalities. Some people have much more access to resources, wealth, and the fruits of human innovation than others. This leads us to ask the questions: Do we really have one human history, or many? And has the trend in human history been towards equally shared experiences, or to greater inequality and quite different experiences for different people? There’s a lot of data that suggest that things are getting better overall. Around the world, extreme poverty—living on less than two dollars a day—is decreasing. Basic education levels are rising. Literacy rates are increasing, as is vaccination against disease. Partly as a result of all of this, child mortality—death in childhood, mostly due to disease—has decreased in each of the past five decades.

But not everyone agrees with this rosy analysis. Some argue about the accuracy of the data, especially the older numbers. Others argue that if we set the poverty bar higher—at \$7.40 a day—poverty might actually be increasing. And any improvements that may be happening are not evenly spread around the world. Some people, even in a single country or city, have benefited far more than others.

Nowhere exemplifies the relationship between the challenges and opportunities of the last century more than Detroit, Michigan. Detroit was one of the greatest success stories of the Industrial Revolution. By 1914, it had a massive and diverse population, including large communities of African Americans, Latinos, and recent immigrants from Europe. Many worked in the new American auto industry, which gave Detroit its nickname, the Motor City. They also produced much of the country’s metalworks, paints, and railcars. These industries shipped goods around the country and around the world, benefiting from globalization. Labor reforms meant that workers received benefits, like the 40-hour work week, a novelty in the country.

It wasn’t all perfect, though. Detroiters volunteered in two world wars, and many died. But these conflicts also expanded Detroit’s industry, as tanks rolled off lines that had once built family cars. But by the 1960s, Detroit was experiencing many of the downsides of globalization. Not everyone agrees about what went wrong. Certainly, as the rest of the world caught up with capitalist industrialization, factories moved to other regions where there were fewer protections for workers, and, as a result, lower production costs.

A photo of a vandalized building in Detroit is contrasted with a photograph of fancy-looking houses in the suburbs

As unemployment rates in Detroit grew, crime increased and living standards dropped. Factory workers were particularly affected by this, whereas many managers and specialists kept their jobs and moved out to the suburbs. A huge economic divide opened between those who lived in the suburbs and those who remained in the declining city centers. The 2007-2008 global financial crisis only exacerbated these problems. Today, Detroit is trying to climb back out of its depression by reinventing itself, a difficult task. As with many cities around the world, some attempts at improvement have led to gentrification, a process by which cities become wealthier, but only by displacing the poorer residents to less desirable, often rural, regions.

07:57

Kim Lochner

Globalization was first a building block of Detroit's success, and later, a cause of great suffering. This kind of shifting story has occurred in many regions, which alternately benefit and suffer from the impact of globalization. Zooming in on Detroit and taking a close-up view gives us a different story to tell about the last 100 or even 250 years.

Colby Burnett

A timeline shows the regions that held the most economic influence from 1750 until today

Consider, as another example, the parts of the world that have played the most influential role in the global economy for the last 250 years. In 1750, there was no question that China and India still dominated global markets, even though there was a rising role for European countries, such as Great Britain. However, by 1914, European countries controlled the largest portion of the global economy, as well as most of the land on the Earth. Yet today, as the United States has taken the place held by European nations at the start of World War I, China, India, and Middle Eastern countries are again major players in global trade and economics.

09:02

Kim Lochner

A modern industrial factory; traffic camera footage from a city in the 19th century

Switching between a long and a short view is similar to moving between a global and a close-up view of one region—something we've been trying to demonstrate throughout your journey through the past. In both cases, changing scales—whether geography or time—helps us ask better questions and get better answers.

In studying our world today, this most recent Era seems to give us the most information for understanding how things came to be the way they are. But as you study the last century or so, don't forget to think about the long-term trends that also help us make meaning of world history.

Colby Burnett and Kim Lochner in conversation

So that's everything?

Well, they still have to do the unit.

And then history just stops?

Not at all, it just changes its name to...

The future! Yes, I was totally listening.