

Gavrilo Princip and a First Day Quiz

Written by Dylan Kissane

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The first class in the POL 210 course always includes a general knowledge quiz.

The typical CEFAM business student is competitive, almost to a fault. With dreams of playing the markets to win in New York City, being a commodities trader in Chicago or managing a hedge fund out of Luxembourg or Zurich, students here are always ready to push themselves and their peers in friendly competition.

To be honest, the goal of this quiz is not really to test the knowledge of the students as much as it is to give them a taste for the wide world waiting to be studied. The idea of the quiz, when it works as planned, is for the students to get about half the questions correct, to find that a couple of their absolute certainties are incorrect, and to begin to realise that there is an awful lot about the world that falls into a survey course in international politics.

The quiz, though, comes second. While it will give students something to reflect on after the class, and some facts for the more curious minds to Google later that night, it won't grab their attention. Grabbing the attention of the students is crucial when they have a full schedule of classes each week and international politics is competing for their time. This is why the class begins with a story I think speaks to the richness and complexity of international politics: the story of Gavrilo Princip.

After the class has settled down, I've taken attendance and closed the door, I throw a single photo of a Serbian teenager from the early 20th century. The title above the photo is a simple statement of fact: The Teenager Who Changed the World.

I ask the students to look at the photo and tell me the name of the young man. When the name is mentioned (it usually doesn't take long – like I mentioned, these are competitive students) I launch into ten minute history of the world since 1914. From Princip and Ferdinand in Sarajevo on that June day through World War One, the interwar years in Europe, Russia, North Africa and the Americas, World War II and into the Cold War, post-Cold War American unipolarity, Rwanda, Yugoslavia and then onto 9/11 and the present day.

I round out this mini history by returning to that single day where a young man about their age set in motion a series of events that led, directly or indirectly, the sorts of scenes that still flutter on TV screens every evening here in France. How incredible, I suggest, that a single person could have this much impact on the world. And then the kicker:

“Is the next Gavrilo Princip in this room? The classroom next door? What if we had a way of knowing what might happen next in world politics? What if we could do more than just describe and explain politics, and instead predict this complex system of states and interests? We don't have those sorts of tools yet, but anyone who is working on developing a predicative theory like that started in a classroom just like this one, taking a course just like this one, and wondering if it is possible...just like you are.”

And, if I am lucky, one or two of them will have that glint in their eye that says, yes, they are starting to wonder if such things are possible.

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