

EPISODE 12

FAKE HISTORY

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is episode number twelve of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Okay, today is going to be a little longer than usual. On the other hand, though, it's also going to be filled with some interesting stories. So let's get started.

Now back in 1947 Life Magazine was *the* middle brow picture and news magazine that everyone read. And on the cover of its July 17 issue there was an extremely disturbing picture. A very large menacing drunk was sitting on the seat of a very large menacing motorcycle and glaring at the camera. Around the motorcycle were about a hundred broken beer bottles.

The story inside the magazine told of how four thousand members of motorcycle clubs had descended upon the small town of Hollister, CA, situated about a hundred miles south of San Francisco and in the middle of nowhere. They had thoroughly cowed the small police force, had raced up and down the main street, and had proceeded to drunkenly injure each other and innocent bystanders. Businesses were destroyed and women and children were terrorized. One of the hoodlums was quoted as saying, 'Other groups have their kinds of conventions. This is *our* kind of convention.'

And since at the time Life Magazine was such a big deal, in no time the country was up in arms. Other towns and cities which had always sponsored motorcycle races and rallies called them off immediately. World War II had just been won, but now the United States had a brand new threat to fear.

In 1953 a feature film, 'The Wild One', was released. It was based on the 1947 events in Hollister, and it starred Marlon Brando, who had just shot to fame as the smoldering, confused, intense, angry Stanley Kowalski of 'A Streetcar Named Desire.' Now he was smoldering, confused, intense, angry Johnny. The plot didn't much matter. What viewers got from the movie was the image of out of control (for the times) 'bikers' tearing up the peace and morality of small town America. And the viewers remembered Johnny's comebacks. When a girl asks him, 'What are you rebelling against, Johnny?', he sneers back, 'What have you got?' When at the end of the movie the townspeople are

beating the crap out of him, he sneers back, 'My old man used to hit me harder than that.'

The photo of Johnny/Marlon wearing his little black pseudo-policeman's hat and perched on his motorcycle became one of the indelible images of the Fifties. And although the biker clubs in the movie just drank beer, got into fistfights, and were generally rude, soon the real biker clubs in California got a lot more threatening than that.

They adopted names like 'Satan's Hordes' and 'Hell's Angels'. Instead of little black hats they were now wearing Nazi helmets. Their bikes became bigger and meaner looking, and were now called 'hogs'. Rivals were no longer getting punched out, they were getting killed.

As the Fifties turned into the Sixties beer gave way to hard liquor and speed. By 1969 in Altamont, when they were knifing a man to death front and center (just after Mick Jagger had sung 'Sympathy For The Devil'), the Hell's Angels had become a terrifying criminal organization specializing in the manufacture and distribution of methamphetamine.

On the other hand, certain elements of the literary crowd still saw them as powerful symbols, as existential avenging angels loosed upon a decadent, boring middle class world. After all, theirs was a natural rebellion, wasn't it? That had started back in Hollister, in 1947, when that first wave of unbottled rage had shouted to the rest of the phony, uptight country that some people just weren't going to take it any more.

Except...

Except that said riot never actually happened.

It's true that 4000 motorcyclists had been in Hollister on that Fourth of July weekend.. But this was because Hollister had *always* had motorcycle races and rallies. It was the most profitable weekend of the year for the local bars and hotels. While it's also true that nowhere near that number had ever shown up before, there were two good reasons for this. First, the rally had been suspended during the war years, so this was the first chance for riders to take part in such an event for a long time. Moreover, motorcycles had been an integral part of the war effort, and a lot of young guys had just gotten out of the army with four years of unspent pay. So it was natural for there to be many more enthusiasts than before.

For it is pretty important to point out that at the time there was absolutely nothing sinister about being a member of a motorcycle club. It was no different than being a member of a skydiving club or a softball league. It was something that young energetic working men did to have fun on the weekend. There was no sense of territoriality or sense of conflict between the various clubs. They had names like

'Yellow Jackets' and 'Jackrabbits', they wore club sweaters, and they held informal field meets.

The 4,500 townspeople of Hollister were amazed when so many riders showed up on Friday. But they were far more curious than frightened. The local police were overwhelmed by the sheer numbers, but not by any lawlessness. And when they asked the bar owners to stop serving beer a couple of hours early, everyone happily complied.

For the motorcyclists were drinking a lot and having spur of the moment drag races up and down the main street, and a number ended up going to the hospital for cuts and scrapes, and a number ended up paying \$5 fines for 'drunk and disorderly'. But it was more of a boisterous party than anything else. There was no property damage in the town. No citizen of Hollister was injured or even threatened. In fact, years later about the most disruptive thing that any of the townspeople could remember was that someone was throwing water balloons from the second floor balcony of a hotel.

Indeed, five months later the town was glad to throw another motorcycle rally.

But all that weekend the San Francisco Chronicle was printing front page stories that screamed of 'Havoc In Hollister' and the like. And by Sunday the governor of the state was so concerned that he sent sixty state troopers into town. The bike club members were all sitting around on street curbs hanging out that morning when an overwhelming law enforcement presence showed up and told them in no uncertain terms that they all had to leave. It was all rather confusing, since absolutely nothing was going on. Nonetheless, they all immediately got on their bikes and headed back home.

After all, they all had to be back at work on Monday anyway.

A couple of days later Life Magazine showed up. They found a local man who was big and beefy, and posed a picture of him sitting on a motorcycle with bottles of beer in each hand. Around him they piled as many of the broken beer bottles from the weekend as they could find.

And that's how the idea of the sociopath biker was born. And that's why that guy was knifed to death at Altamont 22 years later.

Okay. Pretty strange, eh? Now let me tell you this one:

In 1960 a powerfully dramatic movie called 'Inherit The Wind' came out. It was based on a play of the same name, which was a lightly fictionalized account of the famous Scopes 'Monkey' Trial of 1925.

I was in the eighth grade at the time, and had already learned about the trial in American

History. An idealistic young teacher in Tennessee had dared to defy a state law that had, of all things, banned the teaching of evolution, and he had been arrested and thrown in jail for his efforts. America's most famous defense attorney of the time, Clarence Darrow, had heard about this narrow minded travesty of justice and American values, and had magnanimously offered to defend the man. The ensuing trial had shown the rest of the United States, not to mention the entire world, just how unbelievably backward and ignoble so much of our South was.

Spencer Tracy played the part of Clarence Darrow, and he showed the man to be dynamic, kindhearted, incisive, and a fearless battler for the Truth. Against him was the actor Frederick March, who played the part of William Jennings Bryan, who three different times had been the Democratic nominee for President, but who now was a doddering old fundamentalist fool. It wasn't even a close fight. The clear scientific rationality of Tracy/Darrow easily defeated the emotional and confused blind belief of March/Bryan. And for years afterward I would remain impressed by this stirring example of the brave triumph of principled Reason over craven Ignorance.

Except...

Except that the entire Scopes Trial was nothing but a gigantic publicity stunt.

It turns out that in 1925 a Tennessee legislator, a farmer named James Butler, had just heard about the theory of evolution for the first time. And he didn't much cotton to the idea. So he introduced a bill to ban the teaching of it, and—as has happened so many times before in the histories of bizarre bills and state legislatures—the bill was actually passed. This took place even though at the same time the state mandated science textbook in Tennessee had been teaching the theory of evolution for many years.

The people up North had a field day with these presumably hoohah yahoos, and the ACLU immediately offered to defend any teacher who might be arrested.

Reading of this, the owner of a small mine who was living near the small town of Dayton, TN, (population 1,500) had a bright idea which he took to the city council. Why not arrest a teacher and have a trial? The ensuing publicity would be great for business and would put the town on the map. And, after some deliberation, the council agreed.

The mine owner now approached his friend, a young football coach and substitute school teacher named John Scopes, and asked if he wanted to be the patsy. John replied that he wasn't sure that he had ever actually taught evolution. But, hey, what the heck, why not?

Meanwhile the mine owner had also been communicating with the ACLU and with every major

newspaper in the country to see how much interest he could generate. So that when John Scopes was duly fake 'arrested' by the authorities, who should come up with his \$100 bail but the Baltimore Sun?

And why would the Baltimore Sun be interested in financing this 'trial'? Because on its staff was H.L. Mencken, the country's best known—and most decidedly most caustic and vitriolic—columnist of the day.. His stock and trade was sarcastically mocking America's 'boobocracy', the morons and charlatans and Babbitts and nincompoops who inhabited the heartland.

So it turns out that this story was literally just made for him.

William Jennings Bryan, who had first run for President thirty years earlier, and who hadn't been in a courtroom for thirty-six years, eagerly signed up for the prosecution. In response, Clarence Darrow, who just also happened to be one of the nation's most famous agnostics, volunteered for the defense. (By the way, these were the marquee players. Both sides had extensive legal teams.)

The town elders soon got their wish. Over 200 reporters flocked in from all over, including from as far away as England. Hundreds of miles of new telegraph lines were laid. An airstrip was built so that movie newsreel film could be flown out every day. It would become the first trial in American history with live radio coverage. Dayton was now firmly on the map.

But it was there as an object of total ridicule. Outside the courtroom was an ongoing carnival of evolution, complete with performing chimpanzees. A chimp was on the cover of Life Magazine. None of the news coverage even pretended to be evenhanded. It was a golden opportunity for the literate classes to show themselves and the rest of the world what idiots their rural counterparts were.

The ACLU had originally hoped to make the trial a forum for discussing weighty issues of rationality and intellectual integrity. But the judge (correctly) ruled that this wasn't about whether or not the theory of evolution was correct; it was about whether or not someone had broken a state law in teaching evolution. And it didn't help the defense that, once the spotlight of fame was upon him, Scopes (who, you remember, probably never had actually taught it) freely incriminated himself.

So the trial itself devolved into a farce wherein Darrow cleverly got Bryan to take the stand as an 'expert' witness on religion, and then proceeded to show the nation what a foolish old man the foolish old man was.

In the end Scopes was convicted of teaching evolution and was fined \$100. All the reporters went home. The case was taken to appeal, where it was overturned on a technicality. The law stayed on the books for another forty years, but was totally ignored by every single person and teacher in Tennessee.

And for the past 90 years, in history, plays, and movies, the case has stood as a shining example of the triumph of Science over Religion. Of Reason over Superstition. Of Truth over Darkness.

And nobody seems to care that much that the whole thing was a total lie.

So why have I told you these stories? Well, first of all, because they really tickle my sense of something. If nothing else they show that the fake news thing has been going on long before any of us were even born.

But now I want to get serious, and tell you some real, honest to goodness, serious History. And I don't think that this will tickle any of you.

Here it is:

By the beginning of 1945 all of the participants in World War II could see that the end was near. In Europe the Red Army was smashing its way towards Berlin. The Americans and Brits, having just turned back Hitler's last lunge in the Battle of the Bulge, were heading there from the West. In the Pacific naval war the United States was totally in control. Because after almost having been dealt a knockout blow at Pearl Harbor, with a little bit of luck and a whole lot of resources the U.S. had pretty much obliterated the Japanese Navy. Sure, there would still be Iwo Jima and Okinawa and the probable necessity of invading the home islands. But that, if difficult, was still doable.

There was, however, one rather large problem with defeating Japan that the United States could not solve on its own.

In the Northeast of China, sitting across from Korea, is the very large province of Manchuria. In the late 1920s this area had been not only very thinly populated, but also lacking in any sort of coherent government. At the same time Japan was both overpopulated and also economically and militarily far more advanced than any country in Asia. And some nationalistic dreamers in Japan had a vision of conquering Manchuria and annexing it to the mother country. So they did. And ten years or so later 'Manchukuo' was filling up with immigrants, new factories, and new railroads.

It also had a million man army called the Kwantung. And throughout the ensuing war, through all the victories and defeats, like in a giant game of Risk, this gigantic Japanese army basically just stayed there. Rested and waiting. Totally safe from any American attack. So that U.S. planners concluded that as long as the Kwantung Army survived, the military leaders in Tokyo, no matter how badly their navy was faring, would never surrender.

So: What to do?

Well, Manchuria bordered on Siberia. And the Russians were our close allies, right? So how about getting them to invade from the north?

Now there were several problems with this idea. The first was that the Soviet Union wasn't at war with Japan. Back when Hitler had invaded in 1941 the Soviets had been fully expecting Japan to declare war, also. And if that had happened most historians agree that there was no way that the Soviet Union could have survived. For whatever reason, however, Japan hadn't declared war. So the Soviet regime now felt very indebted to Japan. Not to mention that it was Marxist doctrine that a previous Russo-Japanese war, in 1905, had been a horrible imperialist mistake that no self respecting Bolshevik would ever repeat.

A much, much larger issue, though—as mentioned in episode eight—was that the Soviet Union had borne by far the largest part of the war in Europe. About two million people had died in Leningrad alone during its two year siege, and it is generally accepted that at least twenty million Soviet citizens died in the war. That's 20,000,000. (By comparison, about 400,000 Americans, about 2% of that number, were killed, and virtually all of them were soldiers, not women and children.) The Nazis had also destroyed well over half of the industrial base that the Soviets had so painstakingly put together in the previous twenty years. (Our homeland, of course, had gotten off scot free.) Russians are famous for their ability to withstand suffering. But the last thing these people or their leaders wanted now was another new battle against a country which had done them no wrong in the first place.

The final point, though, was that Moscow was almost 6,000 miles from Vladivostok, the main Russian city on the Pacific. (Again, by comparison, it is less than 5,000 miles between Miami, Florida, and Fairbanks, Alaska.) And the only thing connecting them, through one of the most severe climates in the world, was a single track of railroad laid down fifty years earlier. One can only imagine the logistical nightmare of moving all the men and materiel necessary for an invasion against a million man army. And this after having just gone through some of the worst devastation that any people or country has ever suffered.

But the Russians, even in tsarist times, had always really, really wanted to be friends with America. (Interestingly enough, they were the only major country which had never been our 'enemy'.) And—hard as it may be to believe now—Stalin thought of FDR as a good friend and true ally. In fact he naively looked forward to a time after the war when the U.S.S.R, Britain and the United States would continue to help each other and jointly run the new world order. So at the Yalta Conference in

February, 1945, he agreed to enter the war against Japan exactly three months after the war in Europe was over.

For their part, the Americans were more than happy. After all, their planners had been assuming that the war in the Pacific wouldn't be over at least until the end of 1947. Russian involvement would be critical to those plans. And all they had had to offer the Soviets in return were some minor territorial gains and some economic rights in Manchuria.

The Nazis capitulated on May 8. Then, true to their word, the Russians immediately started moving everything they could all those thousands of miles east. This was done in total secrecy, partly in order to fool the Japanese, but mostly because the Russian people, even in a dictatorship, wouldn't have been able to handle the stress of even more war on the horizon. By the end of July the Soviets had achieved the almost impossible, and 1,500,000 men, plus all the food, guns, tanks, and ammunition that they would need, were just about ready for the invasion.

Whereas meanwhile...

FDR had died in April. Harry Truman, by far not the brightest guy in the world, and a man with virtually no knowledge of international affairs, had become president. And the advisers which he chose had done nothing to dissuade him from his instinctive dislike of all things Russian and all things Communist. So that when he traveled to the Potsdam Conference in the middle of July he was already prepared to treat Stalin as a hated enemy, not even as a friend of necessity.

What's more, at this point he knew a powerful secret that might make the Soviets totally unnecessary for future military plans. At the beginning of the war every major participant had realized that an atomic bomb—one among many other futuristic weapons—was theoretically possible. But the Manhattan Project which the United States had started had always been a very expensive long shot. Now, however, the scientists involved were saying that a test explosion was only days away. So Truman kept delaying the start of the conference until he had received word of the test.

The Trinity Blast occurred on July 16, and word was immediately cabled to Potsdam. Truman and his English partner Winston Churchill became absolutely ecstatic. Screw the Russians! Now the United States could defeat Japan on its own, and be the complete master of Japan, China, and the Pacific region for far into the foreseeable future. Stalin, their erstwhile ally, was obliquely told about a 'new powerful weapon', but that was it.

The two other ready-to-explode devices which the U.S. had built were now hustled across the Pacific as quickly as possible. And on the morning of August 6, the earliest possible date, the city of

Hiroshima was obliterated. On August 8, exactly three months after Germany had surrendered, the Russians—once again true to their word—invaded Manchuria. On August 9, as if to both prove a point and to show the Russians who the world's new top dog was, Nagasaki was sacrificed.

It turned out that as it happened most of the best men and equipment of the Kwantung Army had been siphoned off in order to aid Japan's fight in the Pacific, so that the Russian conquest of Manchuria was relatively easy. Then it turned out that Britain and the U.S. reneged on all the promises they had made to Stalin at Yalta. Finally, it turns out that many (non-American at least) historians agree that it was the surprise Russian entry into the war, not the atomic bombs, which was the real major final reason for Japan's unconditional surrender.

For it turns out that Japan had been desperately trying to surrender for months beforehand. The only sticking point had been their emotional need for their emperor not to be deposed. And the slim reed of hope that they held on to was that the Russians, who they had saved by not declaring war on them in 1941, would return the favor and negotiate some sort of surrender just short of unconditional. In this light, the atomic bombs, though awful, were seen by some Japanese leaders as only a continuation of the Americans' napalm firebombing which had already killed far more Japanese civilians. The Russian declaration of war was the real stab in the back which killed all hope.

But it doesn't end there. Because our total betrayal of the Russians was the impetus for Stalin's already existing paranoia of the West to totally take over his mind. To now protect his otherwise defenseless western borders, he clamped the Iron Curtain down on Eastern Europe. An extremely highly motivated Soviet Union produced its own bomb in only four years. And the thousands and thousands of nuclear weapons which still remain in our stockpiles are (so far) silent witnesses to our shortsighted unleashing of the atomic genie.

Now my point in telling this story is not to say that somehow the United States is uniquely evil. It goes without saying that the Japanese and Germans, not to mention the Russians and even the British, all committed many unspeakable horrors during World War II.

No, my point is that in all my time of growing up, through all my exposure to history in high school and university and beyond, I never ran across this story. And I'm a real history freak.

Not that there weren't endless debates and articles and books about the morality and/or usefulness of our detonations of those atomic bombs. But the 'pro' side always stressed that a quick ending to the war saved our side the hundreds of thousands of casualties which a land invasion might

have entailed. And it sometimes added the point that a land invasion would probably have killed a lot more Japanese civilians than Hiroshima and Nagasaki had. Whereas the 'con' side argued that the Japanese, if they had been ensured of the retention of the emperor (which is indeed what ended up happening anyway), were already eager to surrender; that their fuel and equipment were already almost down to zero; that, since no land invasion could have taken place before November anyway, there was still plenty of time for negotiations, test demonstrations of the bomb, etc.

And if Russia was ever mentioned in our retelling of the story, it was only so as to accuse it of opportunistically declaring war once we had done all the hard work. This in spite of the fact that James Byrnes, Truman's Secretary of State, was on the record in 1960 as saying, '(C)ertainly... We wanted to get through with the Japanese phase of the war before the Russians came in.' Even today, what with the continuing fascination that World War II entails, very few Americans are familiar with this aspect of its ending. Even with our vaunted freedom of the press, our tradition of open dialogue, this little inconvenient truth is virtually never mentioned.

For don't forget that everything that I have just related is undeniable incontrovertible historical fact. At Yalta we *did* lean on the Russians to invade Manchuria three months after the end of the war in Europe. Preparing for such an invasion *was* a great hardship for them, but nonetheless they *did* loyally do it. And we *did* make explicit and implicit promises to them which we later reneged on.

So why haven't you ever heard about it? That's easy. Because there's just no way you can put a positive spin on the fact that we knowingly consigned hundreds of thousands of innocent Japanese civilians to horrible deaths just so that we could double cross a trusting ally who had just gone to incredible lengths to do exactly what we had in fact begged and begged them to do.

We tend to have this fantasy that our enemies have some 1984-like Ministry of Truth, where faceless drones churn out whatever fake history the current party line is calling for on that particular day. But were it so simple.

Instead the reality is that there are so many threads which feed into just about any historical event that even those historians with the best and most honorable of intentions can come up with different, and even contradictory, reasons for why something happened. This fundamental problem, that even the most dispassionate seeker of truth can only hope for an approximate understanding of objective historical reality, has been recognized since at least the time of Thucydides.

After all, which of the myriad possible threads *really* caused any given event to happen? Not to

mention that, more often than not, said event usually could not have even happened without the simultaneous confluence of Thread A, Thread B, and Thread C. Then we also have to decide which unifying underlying principle informs the whole process. Is History a story of Great Men bending all those threads to their incredible wills? Is it an intricate and unending dance of impersonal economic or other forces sweeping us along with them? Or is it just dumb luck and pure happenstance over and over and over again? What's more—and to make the situation even more confusing—very good arguments can be made for all three of these completely different approaches.

Although, sadly, much of what we think we know about history doesn't even rise to any level of sincere approximation. For instance, I hope to have just shown you with my story of Hiroshima that, if the actual truth is unpleasant enough to bear, then even non-totalitarian regimes such as ours will collectively choose to ignore it. Meanwhile the population will still have many, many other threads to argue over. So they will never notice that perhaps the most important one has been left out.

Then there is the major problem that much of what we think we know about history, especially popular history, is just plain wrong. Like junk DNA in our genomes, bad ideas and wrong 'facts' get into the collective consciousness, and they are then almost impossible to remove. For instance, George Washington never cut down a cherry tree. Marie Antoinette never said, 'Let them eat cake'. In fact, probably the majority of famous sayings that we think were uttered by famous people were never actually said by them. Those words have been ascribed to them because we want our famous people to be two dimensional exemplars of good or evil. Thus George Washington needs to have been scrupulously honest. Marie Antoinette needs to have been a haughty, out of touch aristocrat.

And this hunger for simplistic blackness and whiteness extends to our understanding of events. As I told you in episode 8, the real story of Christopher Columbus is much more interesting than the one from grade school which had everyone else at the time thinking that the world was flat, and where he was the first person intelligent enough and brave enough to dare to be modern.

But the unfortunate reality is that this is the story that most people believe.

The largest and most important issue, though, is this: It is a cynical truism that history is written by the victors. But it might be more accurate to say that history is written by the victors' perceptions. Or, given the context of this podcast, that it is written as seen through the lens of the victors' ideology.

Here's a hypothetical example. Let's say that around the year 1900 the tsarist regime in Russia

had attempted to enact a new law which improved the lives of the working classes there. But let's say that the principal backer of this new law had been assassinated, and that his replacement turned out to be dead set against it. And/or that there had been a really bad harvest, so that the money was no longer there to implement the reform. And/or that a war had broken out, so that the national attention was now fixed on something else. You would no doubt agree that a non-ideological historian would find any or all of these reasons to be critical in explaining what had happened.

But if you were a Marxist historian you would find all of these facts to be irrelevant. After all, because of your ideology you already 'knew' that inexorable historical and economic forces determined all historical change. You also 'knew' that in a struggle between the classes the capitalists and the aristocracy would never willingly cede anything to the proletariat. So you would interpret the intended reform as either an outright fraud from the beginning, or else the work of a well intentioned fool who had no idea that the rest of his class would never let such a change happen.

Note that such a Marxist historian would not be intentionally lying. Nor would he be making up any of the facts or circumstances. In his mind, in fact, he would be being intellectually rigorous. Those of us outside his system might well conclude that he was just confirming his original bias. But of course he wouldn't see it that way. Instead he would probably just see us as brainwashed shells for that same ongoing capitalist class. (After all, he would say, who else but capitalists fund Yale and Harvard and Princeton and all those other places where history is written?)

By now you're probably prepared for me to once again point out that it's relatively easy to see how *they* are corrupted by their upbringing, culture, religion, or ideology, but that it's far, far more difficult for us to see how *we* might be so corrupted.

But the ideological corruption which occurs in our modern world is so dangerous because it is so insidious. After all, no Ministry of Truth is actually needed. Nor is there any need to think that there are conference rooms full of Elders of Zion or Illuminati who are secretly running the show. All that is necessary is for an ideology to become totally dominant, and then our sense of self, of the natural order of things, and of history will all slant themselves in order to conform to said ideology.

For instance, going back to the Communists, I remember talking to a Russian lady around the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union. She told me how, around 1950, when she was seven or eight, she used to lie in bed and cry herself to sleep at night from feeling so sorry for all the poor little girls who had to live in the misery of the Capitalist West.

So it is easy for me to see how, since said West has now become imbued with those Benthamite Principles, younger people of today just assume that, for instance, 19th Century women must have felt terribly oppressed that they weren't allowed to become lawyers. And these younger people further assume that, if it turned out that those women hadn't felt so oppressed, then that in itself would be unassailable proof of their oppression.

The history that most of us think we know, then, is probably not all that close to the actual history which went down. There's the problem of national interest. There's the problem of simplistic stories which we've never looked into further. There's the problem of junk facts and just outright wrong stories. Finally, there's the problem of ideological slant.

My aim here, though, is not to somehow present a Grand Unified Theory of all of History. Rather it is to make sure that we're all on the same page, as it were, as I lay the foundation upon which and from which what we can call the 'modern' mentality arose.

In doing so I'm not going to deal with the obscure or with anything which is academically dubious or controversial. I'm not going to present any facts or stories that an expert in the field doesn't already accept as valid. And, as with the rest of this podcast, I actively encourage you to look everything up on Wikipedia or the like, and to delve into each subject as deeply as you can.

Although, before we get started, it might be good to briefly outline what could be considered a layman's vague recollection of what they've been taught about Western Civilization.

It would begin with the glory that was Greece, specifically Athens, and the foundations of philosophy, mathematics, poetry, sculpture, architecture, and the rigorous presentation of history. Not to mention the foundations of democracy itself.

This era was followed by the Roman Empire, which was known for its engineering, its military success, and its cruelty. Also for its crazed emperors and moral depravity, which led to its downfall.

Christianity was the third major ancient input. It started in a relatively primitive Jewish corner of the Roman Empire, then somehow expanded to become the West's dominant and only religion.

The Fall of Rome was followed by a thousand years of Dark Ages and Medieval ignorance and superstition. The Church is credited with having kept literacy and other basic civilized arts alive during this period, but at the same time somehow it was also what was responsible for all that ignorance and superstition.

Continuing with our ideology's presentation of history, all of this ended with the wonderful flowering of the Renaissance in the 15th Century. Great talents like Da Vinci and Michelangelo burst forth, and the study of Man and the Real World finally became more important than dwelling on guilt and sin and other depressing religious beliefs.

The 16th Century brought an even more important revolution in thought. For now the totalitarian authority of the Church was finally broken with the Protestant Reformation. The individual conscience became paramount, and people were free to believe and think for themselves.

This led to the Scientific Revolution in the 17th Century. Galileo bravely defied the Church. Francis Bacon proclaimed the Scientific Method. John Locke outlined the natural political rights of man.

All of this fed into the liberalizing tendencies of the 18th Century, and culminated in the ascendancy of rationalism over blind belief, and in the nascent democracy of the American Revolution.

The 19th Century, however, saw a conservative backlash, as epitomized by the reactionary Prince Metternich and the Congress of Vienna in 1814. Here all the old monarchies of Europe were further entrenched, and for the next hundred years, even though there were revolutionary uprisings in 1830, 1848, and 1870, effective reform was effectively quashed.

Something had to give, and in 1914 the inevitable result of nationalism and imperialism—World War I—swept the old order away. In its place arose the visions of individual human rights and of the international rule of law. And, yes, the 20th Century had to deal with movements of the extreme right (such as Fascism) and the extreme left (such as Communism). But ultimately the ideal of Democracy prevailed. So that today, even though the world is far from perfect, and even though many pockets of resistance to change still exist, nevertheless there is better health, more wealth, more freedom, more personal autonomy, and more happiness than ever before in the long and tortured history of humanity.

Well, that's the official story. And I've already throughout this podcast been poking as many holes in it as I can.

But now I'm about to start to explain to you what really went down.

To do so, though, we're going to have to go back to the beginning.

Which starts... right at the beginning... of the next episode.

In the meantime, though, once again, thanks again for so far having listened. Even longer than usual.